



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
2300 Lake Elmo Drive
Billings, MT 59105
August 12 ,2013

TO: Environmental Quality Council
Director's Office, Dept. of Environmental Quality
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*
Director's Office Lands Section
Parks Division Design & Construction
Fisheries Division Legal Unit
Wildlife Division Regional Supervisors
Tim Baker, Governor's Office *
Judy Beck, Press Agent, Governor's Office *
Montana Historical Society, State Preservation Office
Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council *
Montana Wildlife Federation *
Montana State Library *
George Ochenski *
Montana Environmental Information Center *
Wayne Hirst, Montana State Parks Foundation *
FWP Commissioner Matt Tourtlotte*
Montana Parks Association/Our Montana (land acquisition projects)
Matt Wolcott, DNRC Area Manager, Southern Land Office *
County Commissioners *
Other Local Interested People or Groups
* (Sent electronically)

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) developed a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) to remove a small number of eastern brook trout from the upper North Fork of Sage Creek drainage in an ongoing effort to reestablish a self-sustaining population of native Yellowstone cutthroat trout throughout the drainage. This draft EA is essentially an extension of an EA entitled *Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout Restoration in Sage Creek* issued in April 2008. This project involves chemically removing rainbow and brook trout from Sage Creek in the Pryor Mountains and replacing them with pure Yellowstone Cutthroat trout in an effort to establish a secure cutthroat population throughout the Sage Creek drainage. An addendum EA for this project was prepared in July 2010 expanding the length of Sage Creek to be treated on private and Forest Service lands and coordinating efforts with the Crow Nation to treat the section of Sage Creek on the Crow Reservation. Drafts of both the original EA and the Addendum were circulated for 30 days to interested agencies, groups and persons, a news release was sent to regional newspapers, and an article on the project was published in the Billings Gazette on July 15, 2010. The initial draft EA and the Addendum were both posted on the FWP website. No comments were received on the original EA in 2008. One written and two oral negative comments were received on the Addendum from anglers who like catching and being able to harvest brook trout from Sage Creek. The cutthroat fishery in Sage Creek will be managed as a recreational fishery with a standard daily and possession limit of 5 trout, one over 18 inches so anglers will still be able to harvest trout from Sage Creek. An important aspect of this project is to increase interest and support for Yellowstone Cutthroat trout by providing a stream where anglers can harvest this special native trout species. This project involves coordination with a number of private landowners who own land along Sage Creek and are supportive and have been very happy with the results of this project so far.

This latest draft EA addresses two issues. The first is the recent discovery in July 2013 of brook trout in the upper reaches of the North Fork of Sage Creek. The population appears to be isolated above the original project area in a reach of stream that was considered fishless when surveyed in 2010. FWP and other cooperators would like to chemically remove these brook trout in August of 2013 before the adults spawn in September and before fish potentially move downstream into the larger project area.

Additionally the EA approved in 2010 for this effort had a timeline that ended in 2012. This updated EA proposes to extend the timeframe for this effort through 2018. Survey efforts in 2012 and in 2013 did not find any brook trout in the original project area, but found very good populations of Yellowstone cutthroat throughout the area. It is anticipated this treatment will remove the last brook trout in the Sage Creek drainage and future treatments will be unnecessary. If however, brook trout migrate downstream beyond the 2013 treatment area it will be necessary to treat the drainage again.

This latest draft EA was circulated to interested agencies, groups, and persons, and was posted on the FWP website for 15 days. Two written comments were received on this draft. One was a letter of support for the project from the Acting District Ranger for the Beartooth Ranger District, Custer National Forest; the second was a request to extend the comment period to 30 days for this EA. We also received verbal support from several of the landowners along Sage Creek who are very happy with the Yellowstone cutthroat population that has been established in Sage Creek and want to make sure the remaining brook trout are removed before they have a chance to spread downstream. Several factors contributed to the shorter comment period on this EA. This is a small extension of a much larger project that has already been through two 30 day comment periods with very limited comments received. It is critical that the remaining brook trout are removed from the North Fork of Sage Creek before they have a chance to expand downstream and compromise the much larger project that has been completed over the past 4 years. It is also important that this treatment be completed before the brook trout begin spawning in September. Mid-August is the only time necessary crews and certified applicators are available to complete the project before spawning begins.

After reviewing this proposal and the comments received, it is my decision to proceed with this project to remove the remaining brook trout from the Sage Creek drainage. If you have questions regarding this decision notice or wish a copy of the final EA, you may email me at ghammond@mt.gov, or call me at 247-2951.

Thank you for your interest,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Gary Hammond". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "G" and "H".

Gary Hammond

Regional Supervisor